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ENGAGING NORTH KOREA: PUT ON A HAPPY FACE, BUT KEEP ONE HAND ON THE BIG STICK

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ENGAGING NORTH KOREA: PUT ON A HAPPY FACE, BUT KEEP ONE HAND ON THE BIG STICK

This paper outlines strategic considerations regarding U.S. policy with respect to North Korea, and concludes that the current policy being pursued by the Bush Administration is, rightly, wary of North Korean trustworthiness and intentions. The current policy, however, also overestimates the threat to the U.S. homeland posed by the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK); overestimates the possibility of coercing North Korea into taking positive actions on key U.S. interests (especially preventing nuclear and missile proliferation); and undervalues the potential benefits of engaging Pyongyang regarding its ballistic missile program, bearing in mind that any agreement must be comprehensive and fully verifiable.

I. Erratic But Not Irrational: North Korea and the Strategic Environment

Key considerations in reviewing the strategic environment regarding North Korea policy include: the unique nature and status of the DPRK regime; the Agreed Framework with the United States regarding its nuclear program; the views of key U.S. allies South Korea and Japan; and the interests of the DPRK's key ally, China. Domestically, Congressional interest in North Korea remains strong, especially from right-wing critics of the last Administration's policy of engagement (or, as those critics saw it, appeasement).

North Korea: The Bush administration has frequently pointed to the potential threat from missile-armed "rogue" states in arguing for its controversial (national) missile defense (MD) project. More often than not, North Korea is the "rogue" that MD advocates love to hate. This is probably because North Korea leads the rogue league in development of medium- and

long-range missile technology and has aggressively exported both its expertise and missiles, especially to the Middle East. As one pro-MD Senator characterized the situation, "ballistic missiles are essentially North Korea's only cash crop. Because of its dire economic circumstances, it is not likely that North Korea will be dissuaded from marketing that crop."[1]

The Kim Jong Il regime has continued the DPRK's traditional policy of isolation; moreover, the country remains "heavily armed, economically bankrupt, and politically unpredictable….".[2] However, analysts have argued persuasively that tagging the DPRK as a "rogue" is inaccurate and distorts attempts to comprehend its actions and motivations. These analysts argue that North Korea's actions, while at times erratic, have usually been quite rational – rational, that is, for an absolute dictatorship based on a cult of personality, whose principal goal remains regime survival.[3] (The DPRK regime is, however, capable of acts that any responsible government would consider irrational, such as the two deadly late-1980s terror attacks that destroyed an airplane, killing 117, and a bomb that killed 17 ROK officials.) For example, North Korea – impoverished and no longer able to turn to the Soviet Union for help – has used its nuclear and missile programs rationally. These programs have helped to deter what the DPRK perceives as a threat from the ROK and the U.S. Missile exports have earned much-needed hard currency. And both activities have commanded the attention of United States, leading eventually to bilateral talks. (Less persuasive, however, is the extension of this line of argument, i.e. that central to North Korea's long-term goal in pursuing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is to use them as leverage in a quest to end its enmity with the United States.)[4]

North Korea remains economically prostrate, and continuing food shortages and drought risk a return to starvation, which killed up to 2 million North Koreans in the mid-1990s.

According to official U.S. estimates, the DPRK will "continue to require food assistance for the foreseeable future . . . .[t]he regime continues . . . to fund its military programs, including NBC and missile programs, at the expense of its civil economy."[5] It is worth noting that while the DPRK desperately needs economic and food aid, it is highly doubtful that such aid might provide a coercive lever for U.S. policymakers, given the regime's utter disregard for the privations of its citizens. Properly structured, however, food and other assistance might be an effective "carrot" – see section IV.

North Korea continues to abide by the terms of 1994s Agreed Framework with the United States, which led to the suspension of the DPRK nuclear program. Congressional critics of the deal accuse North Korea of continuing a clandestine nuclear program, but IAEA inspections of a suspect facility produced no evidence of one.[6] Recently, the Bush administration has reaffirmed its commitment to terms of the Framework (the U.S. is to provide the North with 500,000 metric tons of fuel oil annually), including Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) provision to the DPRK of two proliferation-safe light water nuclear reactors.

South Korea, Japan and Regional Stability: The Kim Dae Jung government, like all previous ROK governments, has sought to deter an attack by the North and to hasten peaceful reunification. But unlike any previous Southern government, Kim has doggedly pursued these goals through a "sunshine" policy of détente with the DPRK, culminating in the last year's historic Kim Dae Jung--Kim Il Sung summit. This was followed by a subsequent series of humanitarian gestures aimed at family reunification, as well as initiation of broader bilateral national reconciliation talks. The South is also providing significant amounts of food aid and other assistance, including paying 70 percent of the cost of the KEDO reactors. Although the North broke direct contacts with the ROK in March, angry over the new Bush Administration's

tougher line toward the DPRK, contacts resumed in early September – largely the result of Chinese pressure on the North.[7] Further, the Bush Administration is now voicing support for the "sunshine" approach.[8] It is important, however, to note one unintended consequence of Kim's policy: generally, the level of support for U.S. forces remaining in the ROK among South Koreans has been inversely proportional to the level of comity between the North and South; in other words, every time the North takes a positive step, more South Koreans question the need for U.S. forces in their country. In this way, the "sunshine" policy has worked against a key U.S. policy goal, enhancing regional stability through our military presence there.

Japan's engagement on the peninsula is informed by a bitter colonial legacy, but in recent years trade and tourism ties have grown rapidly. Japan wants to maintain regional stability, avoid a war, keep U.S. forces in the ROK, and check the threatening DPRK missile program. To this end, it supports the Kim Dae Jung government's sunshine policy, is a major funder of KEDO, and periodically has provided substantial humanitarian and economic aid to the North. Some commentators have also posited, interestingly, that Japan's real agenda is more nefarious; it, the argument goes, wants the Koreas to remain separate, as a unified Korea might pose a significant threat security threat.[9]

China: North Korea's old war ally has traditionally described the relationship between the two nations "as close as lips and teeth."[10] But the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang is currently under strain, despite rhetoric otherwise, as a result of the North's missile program and its dysfunctional economy. The missile program is cited by the Bush Administration as one of the central reasons the U.S. needs MD, which China strongly opposes. Destitution in the DPRK has forced the PRC to provide food and aid, or risk a flood of Northern refugees. "The fear in Beijing is of total [DPRK economic] collapse, followed by a mass

exodus."[11] China's also seeks regional stability; this is why it has supported inter-Korean talks. Beijing's role may also be key in urging Pyongyang to re-engage directly with the U.S. – particularly in light of the events of September 11.

Congress: President Clinton's policies of engagement with the North were excoriated by Congressional critics, generally Republicans, as little more than appeasement. They claim (without much solid evidence) that North Korea might be able to produce additional nuclear weapons outside the constraints imposed by the Framework Agreement and KEDO. (Convincing arguments have been made to refute this assertion, however, based on hard-headed technical analysis of the Framework Agreement and its verification mechanisms.)[12] Critics also charge that U.S. assistance to the North – the U.S. provided nearly $ 645 million worth of aid, mostly food commodity assistance, from 1995-99 – has served only to prop up a failing authoritarian state and, in any event, was "not well-enough monitored to prevent it being used first and foremost to sustain the regime, its loyalists, and its instruments of tyranny and aggression."[13] The influence of these views, although significantly less now than in the early days of the current Administration, still underlies – and hobbles – the current Bush policy (laid out in section IV, below).

II. Still Dangerous After All These Years: National Interests and Threats to That Interest

Despite its destitution, international isolation, and utter economic eclipse by the South, the DPRK remains a significant threat to the ROK and, more broadly, U.S. regional security interests and regional allies, particularly Japan. The DPRK can be expected to continue past behavior, which, as argued, has been erratic and extreme, if not irrational or "rogue".[14] It reportedly retains enough plutonium, according to multiple sources, to build one or two nuclear

weapons. It fields a huge, forward-deployed conventional army, has concentrated artillery targeted on Seoul, and possesses chemical (and probably biological) weapons, as well as "hundreds of ballistic missiles . . . some of which are capable of reaching targets in Japan."[15] Moreover, its missile (and missile technology) sales to Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan have had a profoundly destabilizing effect in the Middle East and South Asia, running directly counter to key U.S. national interests in those regions. Bearing this situation in mind, vital U.S. interests in the region can be summed up succinctly:

- Deterring a North/South war and preventing casualties to our 37,000 troops in the ROK;
- Reassuring our key regional allies, the ROK and Japan, of our long-term commitment to their security and to maintaining regional stability, principally but not exclusively through the maintenance of our troop presence in the ROK; and
- Securing the U.S. homeland and allies against any possible threat from North Korean attempts to develop (or develop further) weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile delivery systems.

III. No Dong. No Sales. No Problem: Policy Objectives.

Current U.S. Special Envoy to North Korea Charles Pritchard recently outlined the Bush Administration's "basic" policy goals regarding North Korea before Congress:

- North/South reconciliation;
- Maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula;
- A constructive U.S.-North Korean relationship;
- Increased regional stability; and

- A better future for North Koreans.[16]

This is a sensible set of policy targets, and shows sensitivity to the Kim Dae Jung government's domestic political needs – a significant (and positive) change from the early days of the Bush Administration, when officials heavily emphasized the untrustworthiness of the North as a negotiating counterpart.[17] Of course, Pritchard's list should be viewed in light of the United States' overarching policy goal, constraining, and if possible eliminating, the North's nuclear and missile programs and missile technology exports.[18] In describing U.S. views regarding a resumption of a direct dialogue with the North, Pritchard said the agenda should include missile proliferation, nuclear issues, the DPRK's conventional force posture, and humanitarian and human rights concerns. Should the North cooperate and engage the USG on these issues, the U.S. would be prepared to "expand efforts to help the North Korean people, ease sanctions, and take other practical steps." [19] It is tempting to argue that the Administration should add a goal about encouraging economic and political reform in the North, but it is extremely unlikely, given the isolated, totalitarian nature of the regime, that any process of gradual change could be externally motivated (or compelled).

IV. My, Dear Leader, What Big Teeth You Have: Resources, Plans and Statecraft

The last round of direct U.S.-DPRK talks was held during Secretary of State Albright's historic October 2000 visit to Pyongyang. In negotiations with Kim Jong Il, Albright sought to build on the DPRK's 1999 pledge to Special Envoy William Perry to suspend long-range missile testing through 2003.[20] Albright and Kim came close to agreeing on a deal that would have led to the DPRK ending missile exports and suspending production of long-range missiles.[21]

The Bush Administration took office suspicious of North Korean intentions regarding the Agreed Framework and KEDO, and skeptical of the Clinton policy of engagement. Officials, including the President, missed few opportunities to underline their view that the North was a rogue state. (When Kim Dae Jung visited Washington in March, he was embarrassed by President Bush publicly voicing doubts about the DPRK's trustworthiness.[22]) They stressed that KEDO was not adequate to prevent North Korean nuclear weapons development, and that Pyongyang was far along in the development of multi-stage ballistic missiles (specifically, the Taepo Dong II) that would be able to threaten the U.S. homeland.[23] Consequently, direct talks with Pyongyang were suspended, and a "policy review" regarding the DPRK was initiated. The Policy review ended in early June. The Administration subsequently took a more moderate line, offering to renew talks, but insisting that their scope be broadened to include the DPRK's massive conventional forces. [24]

The Administration also insisted, and continues to insist, that key components of the two light water reactors KEDO is to construct will not be supplied to the North until the DPRK come into full compliance with its International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards agreement.[25]

Critics of this policy claim that the approach "moves the goalposts" for the North regarding the Framework.[26] Bridling at the new U.S. conditions, North Korea has so far spurned the Bush Administration's offer of talks.

The effect of the terror attacks of September 11, or more properly the impending U.S. reaction to them, on the U.S./North Korean dynamic remains to be seen. It is likely, however, that the North's disregard for international norms, isolation and continuing ability to threaten to

unleash massive force on the ROK will combine to make the DPRK relatively immune from U.S. pressure and/or military threats (short of a full-scale war).

For the same reasons, the DPRK remains highly resistant to more routine forms of coercion; the Clinton administration learned this the hard way during the 1994 nuclear crisis that preceded the Agreed Framework. Clinton turned to engagement "as a last resort when other options appeared certain to fail."[27] Despite being the option of last resort, it is clear that engaging Pyongyang produced positive results – in distinct contrast to the generally acknowledged failure of that Administration's harder-line approach to other rogues, particularly Iraq. Engaging Pyongyang opened the way toward de-nuclearization of the peninsula and encouraged a "a broader opening of the North to the outside world."[28] U.S. engagement also complemented the Kim Dae Jung government's sunshine policy and North-South bilateral engagement.

If one accepts the very sensible notion that "the overarching goal for United States, South Korea, and Japan remains how to coordinate political and economic engagement [with the North] to diminish the North Korea security threat," then a more forward-leaning approach to engagement than is currently being pursued is called for.[29] Engagement with the North, if pursued with very clear eyes focused on achieving agreements that are comprehensive and fully verifiable, is a no-cost option. All other things being equal, if it fails, you are no worse off than when you were when you started.

Rather than begin with the very important – but immensely difficult – subject of conventional forces, an easier first step, and one that is more likely to end with a positive result, would be to pick up where Secretary Albright left off last year regarding missiles and missile technology. There is no public sign that the Bush Administration intends to moderate its

assertion that the (untested) Taepo Dong II missile poses a threat to the U.S. homeland, and (as noted earlier) that for this reason the Administration must press ahead with a massive and costly MD program. Reaching an agreement with the North to cease development, production and export seems a faster, cheaper and more dependable solution. A missile agreement along the lines laid out in the Albright/Kim talks (see footnote 20) would produce a range of positive results:

- It would end the DPRK missile threat to Japan and the U.S. homeland;
- It would dampen North/South hostility;
- It would help Israel, Kuwait and other Middle Eastern allies;
- It would boost the U.S. standing in North East Asia; and
- Pave the way for additional agreements, breaking down barriers with the North and possible setting the stage for multilateral security cooperation in the region.[30]

Complementing engagement would be the prospect of several "carrots," possibly including increased humanitarian and development aid, removal of the DPRK from the list of state sponsors of terrorism (should the North merit it), and the establishment of U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations.[31]

Of course, any positive steps that we take, or agreement that we strike with the North, should be based on the principle of strict reciprocity. The United States must make clear to Pyongyang that while we want progress in bilateral relations and to achieve agreements that enhance regional stability, real concessions are necessary for progress, i.e. "nothing will not get you something."

This sort of approach should play well in Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing. Indeed, it is manifestly not in U.S. interests to be seen impeding as North/South reconciliation efforts\. Why

not put on a happy face with Kim Jong Il, so long as we keep one hand firmly gripping the big stick?

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[1] Senator Thad Cochran, quoted in "*The Proliferation Primer*," Majority Report, Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services, Committee on Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate (January 1998): 33.
[2] U.S. Congress, Congressional Research Service, "Korea: U.S.-South Korean Relations – Issues for Congress," by Larry A. Niksch (May 14, 2001): 1.
[3] Robert Dujarric, "North Korea: Risks and Rewards of Engagement." *Journal of International Affairs* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 465-487.
[4] Leon V. Sigal, "Countdown on Korea," *The American Prospect* 12, no.15 (August 27, 2001): 22-26.
[5] U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "*Proliferation: Threat and Response*" (January 2001) 9-12.
[6] Ibid. 9-10.
[7] "Korean Thaw," *The Economist Global Agenda* (7 September 2001): available online at http://economist.com/agenda.
[8]Charles L. Pritchard, U.S. Special Envoy for Negotiations with the DPRK and U.S. Special Representative to KEDO, in testimony before The Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives (July 26, 2001).
[9] Dujarric, 468.

[10] "Pursed Lips, Gnashing Teeth," *The Economist Global Agenda* (5 September 2001): available online at http://economist.com/agenda.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Stephen Miloti, Young-Chol Kang and Brian Kremer, "KEDO's Nuclear Safety Approach," *Nuclear News* (January 2001): 34-41.
[13] William R. Hawkins, "Appeasing North Korea," *The Weekly Standard* (20 December 1999): 27.
[14] Those interested in the DPRK's depredations will find much fodder in long list of outrages compiled by the Congressional Research Service in "North Korea: Chronology of Provocations, 1950-2000."
[15] Sigal, 8.
[16] Pritchard testimony.
[17] A sensible conclusion, but one that need not be repeated publicly by policy makers.
[18] North Korea is also widely believed to have active chemical and biological weapons programs (the cause, no doubt, of serious concern to U.S. and ROK military commanders on the peninsula), but these have not been raised in commentary by senior U.S. officials, who have focused on nuclear and missile proliferation.
[19] Pritchard testimony.
[20] Skeptical analysts have assessed this pledge as essentially an attempt to get something for nothing; there is no way, they argue, that Pyongyang would be ready to test another long-range missile before 2003.
[21] Kim offered to: halt all exports of missile technology, including existing contracts; and to freeze testing, production, and deployment of missiles with a range of more than 500 km (this would cover the No Dong, the Taepo Dong I, which was flight-tested over Japan and suspected of being able to carry a light payload to Alaska or Hawaii; as well as the untested three-stage Taepo Dong II, which is believed to be able to reach the continental U.S.). In return, Kim sought U.S. agreement to launch two or three DPRK satellites annually, as well as $1 billion in compensation. The Clinton administration was reportedly prepared up to offer up to $300 million. Kim also wanted a visit by President Clinton to Pyongyang, which was seriously considered by the Administration. Negotiations reportedly stalled when the White House balked in the run-up to the 2000 election. Sources: Sigal and Niksch.
[22] Moon Py Ihlwan, "Don't Expect a Breakthrough Between Washington and North Korea," *Businessweek* (2 July 2001): 55.
[23] Ed Vuillamy and Paul Beavers, "Focus: Star Wars: So Just How Safe is the Nuclear Shield?," *The Observer* (6 May 2001): 6.
[24] This shift in the Administration's initial position was widely acknowledged as a victory for Secretary of State Colin Powell over Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld (and others) who pushed for a harder line toward the DPRK.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Sigal, 24.
[27] Meghan O'Sullivan, "The Politics of Dismantling Containment," *The Washington Quarterly* 24, no.1 (Winter 2001): 67-76.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Joel S. Wit, "North Korea: Leader of the Pack," *The Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 77-89.
[30] Sigal, 24.
[31] This approach again raises the issue of "propping up a failing regime." Clearly, both the USG and the ROK would like to see the back of the Dear Leader and his cadres, and a conscious effort should be made to ensure no humanitarian or food assistance is diverted to support the regime. However, were the Pyongyang regime truly the on the brink of failure, it would take a much higher level of assistance than the U.S. has provided in the past to save it.